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ABSTRACT

The importance of theory in qualitative work is discussed through an examination of the search for theory that arose in relation to a case study of educational change in an American school district. Theory is defined as an analytical, interpretive framework to help the researcher make sense of what is going on in the social setting. Certain propositions may be described as "foreshadowed problems" (in contrast to "preconceived ideas") revealed through educational and cultural change literature. These propositions were the foundation of beliefs about educational change. The concepts of "process" and "function" as defined by R. K. Merton (1967) were essential to the study. The search for theory to support the multiple levels of change observed in the McKenzie school district is detailed. It is suggested that theory has the following roles in qualitative research: (1) identifying theoretical concerns about selectivity of data and implied theoretical biases; (2) helping the researcher acknowledge competing theories and the limitations of any singular perspective; (3) providing a framework for addressing a problem; (4) allowing the anticipation of problems and an initial analysis of a research problem; (5) allowing the study to search for increasing levels of abstraction to move beyond a purely descriptive account; (6) providing a means for judging qualitative research; and (7) promoting creativity through the search for a theory of best fit. (SLD)

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THEORY AND CONCEPTS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:
A Theory of Methodology in a Study of Directed Change

by

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THEORY AND CONCEPTS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:
A Theory of Methodology in a Study of Directed Change

Seeking answers to methodological questions about the genre of qualitative research labeled case study is the challenge that has driven the development of this paper. Louis Smith (1978) has argued that in order to develop a useful and potent theory of methodology there needs to be a sharing of the stories that accompany the evolution of a researcher's work. In part, this is a retrospective account of the development of my doctoral dissertation, and of my struggle with 'theory' and with the increasing levels of abstraction in qualitative research that accompanied it.

Behind most methodologies is a theory, either implicit or explicit, which provides the rationale for the methodological approach... The ostensible aim of the new ethnography is to make ethnographic description more accurate and replicable than it has presumably been in the past... If one sees ethnography as an adjunct to a theoretical anthropology--that is, as a kind of laboratory in which theories are formulated, tested, modified, or revised--then a description couched in terms that go beyond native categories is essential. (Kaplan and Manners 1986:181)

Perhaps one of the problems associated with talking about 'theory' is the ambiguity associated with a definition of the term. Anthropologists David Kaplan and Robert Manners allude to the difficulty that scientists and philosophers have faced in defining theory:

In general, if a proposition or a body of propositions explains, predicts, retrodicts or leads us to 'new' avenues of research it is likely to be called a theory. In short, theories are defined pragmatically rather than strictly in terms of their formal properties. (Kaplan and Manners 1986:12)

For the purposes of this paper, I am suggesting a working definition of theory as an analytical, interpretive framework that helps the researcher make sense of "what is going on" in the social setting being studied. This pragmatic definition of theory is in keeping with Louis Smith's (1978) conservative view of theory as "novel, comprehensive, internally consistent, and functional" (p.360), and provides a framework for viewing the 'theory,' 'concepts,' and 'hunches,' discussed in this paper.

Throughout my graduate studies I was primarily concerned with issues related to methodology in qualitative research. Until participating in a graduate seminar based on culture theory, I had not considered 'theory' an area of concern. My previous modest attempts at qualitative research (cf. Mills 1985, 1987) had aimed at describing social settings involving transient (highly geographically mobile) children and sorority girls. Yet in so doing I had failed to consider the underlying assumptions that guided what I chose to report and the manner in which I reported it. Kaplan and Manners (1986) argue that a level of abstraction, a theoretical anthropology, cannot be reached without an understanding of what it is that has guided one's work. Louis Smith has described this process as the "somewhat tortuous route one investigator took in searching for a theoretical-methodological rationale to solve the problems he was confronting" (1978:326). It is such a tortuous route that I have chosen to travel while describing my struggle with competing theories--none of which is working perfectly.

In this paper, I would like to outline some of the propositions about educational and cultural change that I had developed prior to commencing a study of an American school district attempting educational change (Mills 1988), and the theories, concepts or hunches that facilitated my analysis. However, my thinking about "theory" is in response to questions raised by discussants at a paper presentation (Mills 1989) related to my dissertation study. These questions beckoned me to address issues surrounding my use of Robert Merton's (1967) classic treatment of manifest and latent functions of change. These issues included:

1. When and where did "manifest functions" occur to me?
2. What functions does this perspective fulfill--are they "theory" or are they "concepts" in lieu of theory?
3. Was I "theory-less" or "concept-less" until these perspectives showed up?
4. Are there lower and higher orders of the themes and strategies I presented? Are they "sorting" categories, or concepts, or "theory"?
5. Where did these categories come from and what do I do with them?

Change Propositions

The propositions I entered the field with may more accurately be described as "foreshadowed problems" in contrast to "preconceived ideas":

If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him into the field, the more he is in the habit of molding his theories according to facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better he is equipped for the work. Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer in his theoretical studies. (Malinowski 1922:8-9)

Like the other graduate students in Professor Wolcott's seminar on educational and cultural change, I was required to examine the literature on change, and to develop a list of the propositions I held to be true. The timing of this assignment was fortuitous in that it coincided with the development of my dissertation research proposal, and negotiations for entree to a nearby school district. I would propose these propositions as a list of foreshadowed problems revealed through a foray in the educational and cultural change literature. The propositions focused on the following 12 statements:

Incremental Change

Regardless of the magnitude of a change, it is crucial to the success of the change efforts to introduce the change in small increments.

Pay-Offs

It is important to those persons "targeted" for a change, as well as those persons charged with the responsibility of implementing the change, to see the potential "pay-offs" for being involved in the change process.

Change is Slow

The change process is slow and must always be undertaken in a manner which allows the participants in the change time to adjust.

Cooperation

To accomplish change it is necessary to have the cooperation of those targeted for the change.

Active Involvement

The proponents and recipients of a change should be actively involved in the development of the change.

Resistance

Resistance will result from any attempt to change the status quo of a social system.

Community Awareness

To be successful at any attempt at change, the change agent must be fully aware of the wants of the community targeted for the change.

Group Cooperation: Reducing Resistance

In order to be successful in bringing about change it is necessary to reduce resistance, ranging from apathy and inertia to open hostility, and to win the targeted group's cooperation in carrying out a program.

Change Agents

The manner in which a change agent conducts himself is crucial to the success of any change attempt. In order to be successful this person should have well developed personal skills

and knowledge. For example, knowledge of human behavior, and a clear idea of the nature and properties of what is being changed.

Socio-Political Circumstances

Socio-political circumstances outside the school profoundly affect what goes on inside of schools. School change needs to be viewed in terms of the society in which the school exists.

Individual Experience

For change efforts in schools to be successful it is important to understand the dynamics and interactions between individuals as they experience change.

Change is a Process

Change is a process, not an event.

Competing Theories

Given that these propositions were the foundation of my beliefs about the nature of educational change, an attempt to fit them into a particular theoretical position may help my search for a theory of best "fit" for me. I should also note that the focus question of my study, "How does change function and what functions does it serve in an American school district?" provides further clues about the theoretical perspective I am most closely aligned with. Smith (1978) proposes the identification of theoretical concerns taken into the field as one way to combat concerns about selectivity of data, seeing what one wants to see, and implicit theoretical biases. What follows is an analysis of my implicit theories, concepts, or hunches that accompanied me

into the McKenzie school district.

Latent Functions, Manifest Functions, and
Unintended Consequences of Change

Important to my study of the McKenzie school district were the concepts of "process" and "function." Robert Merton defines functions as follows:

Functions are those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system; and dysfunctions, those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system. There is also the empirical possibility of nonfunctional consequences, which are simply irrelevant to the system under consideration. In any given instance, an item may have both functional and dysfunctional consequences, giving rise to the difficult and important problem of evolving canons for assessing the net balance of the aggregate consequences. (Merton 1967:105)

Of interest to me were Merton's complementary dimensions of latent function and manifest function:

Manifest functions are those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognized by the participants in the system. Latent functions, correlatively, being those which are neither intended nor recognized. (Merton 1967:105)

Further, Merton distinguishes between the "unintended consequences" of action and "latent functions." Merton considers that the unintended consequences of action are of three types:

- (1) those which are functional for a designated system, and these comprise the latent functions;
- (2) those which are dysfunctional for a designated system, and these comprise the latent dysfunctions; and
- (3) those which are irrelevant to the system which they affect neither functionally nor dysfunctionally, i.e., the pragmatically unimportant class of non-functional consequences. (Merton 1967:105)

Taking as a focus question, "What are the functions of change and what function do they serve in an American school district?" I proposed that it is possible to discuss change in an American school district in terms of manifest and latent functions. In discussing the "lessons" from the case, I borrowed Merton's terms "manifest function," "latent function," and "unintended consequences" to summarize the managing and coping strategies used by personnel at different levels within a school district, and to view the functions these strategies might serve in the process of educational change.

Smith (1978) proposes that qualitative researchers entering the field with many theories that may be applicable to the case are involved in a process of:

running several alternative general theories against each other, that is, putting them in competition. In a sense we were unwittingly initiating an ethnographic paradigm for falsification. In addition, we were not only selecting from the several stances but also moving toward the beginnings of our own position. (1978:332)

It is this process of examining competing theories in which I engaged before, during, and after the completion of my fieldwork. It was through my theoretical studies of culture theory, and educational and cultural change, that the "foreshadowed problems" of my study emerged. As Smith suggests:

The foreshadowed problems represent initial and partial analyses of the problem, the tenor of thinking of people who are working in related and relevant areas, and provisional modes of thinking. (Smith 1978:331)

But when did these concepts of manifest function, latent function, and unanticipated consequences crystalize in my thesis

about educational change as the beginnings of my own position? For an answer to this question I must return to the period of my fieldwork. Data were collected utilizing a variety of techniques including participant observation, interviewing, written sources of data, and non-written sources of data. The process of data analysis and interpretation were ongoing and dialectic during the collection of data. The fieldwork completed, there was time during the writing of the descriptive account when I could reflect on the common patterns that had emerged during the study and appeared to account for much of the behavior observed and discussions recorded. Opler (1945) refers to these common patterns as "themes" or "cultural themes" (p.198). Yet it would seem that these concepts of manifest and latent functions emerged during the latter days of my fieldwork as I was comparing and contrasting themes that were emerging from my fieldnotes. Smith considers that this process of comparing and contrasting, and looking for antecedents and consequences is the essence of concept formation:

As items appear in the perceptual images, as verbal comments are recorded, as situations appear, as events come and go, one asks a simple two-sided question: How are they alike, and how are they different? the similar things are grouped and given a label that highlights their similarity. The different things are grouped, insofar as possible, and given labels.... In time, these similarities and differences come to represent clusters of concepts, which then organize themselves into more abstract categories and eventually into hierarchical taxonomies. (Smith 1978:338)

In my study of the McKenzie school district I pursued a process of comparing events, and grouping clusters of concepts that eventually led to the development of a "Taxonomy of Managing

and Coping Strategies." It is my proposition that the behaviors I have described as strategies represent the methods used by school district personnel to manage and cope with multiple innovations. The taxonomy represents the gamut of behaviors used at different levels in the school district. Some strategies have been discussed in role specific terms, i.e., "Keeping in Touch with the Real World" is exemplified as a strategy used in the role of the Director of Elementary Education. However, I propose that the strategies be considered at the school district "levels."

Strategies Used by Central Office Personnel to Manage
and Cope with Multiple Change

- Administrative Posturing: The "Facade"
- Inaction
- Keeping in Touch with the "Real World"
- The Practicality Ethic
- Playing Games: Giving Lip-Service
- "Dancing" at a Meeting
- Utilizing the Committee Structure

Strategies Used by Principals to Manage
and Cope with Multiple Change

- Using Personal Beliefs, Values, and Goals
- Developing Personal Relationships
- Emphasizing the Importance of School Needs over District Directives

--Explaining Change: The Politics of a School District

--Maintaining the Status Quo: Finetuning Instructional Programs

--Accountability

--Using Duality in Language

Strategies Used by Teachers to Manage and Cope with Multiple Change

--Utilizing Compliance and Resistance Behaviors

--Giving Lip-Service

--Promoting the "Bandwagon" Effect

--Seeking Motivation for a Career in Teaching

--Taking Formal Action

Multiple Levels of Change

It is my thesis that the case study of the McKenzie school district suggests there are multiple levels at which efforts to manage and cope with change should be examined when looking at the dynamics of a school district. Personnel at different levels in a school district employ different strategies. Further, the "level" of the change effort, whether it be state or district mandated, based on "soft" or "hard" money, instigated by central office personnel or growing out of personal interest at a building-level, elicit different managing and coping strategies from central office personnel, principals, and teachers.

Struggling with Theory

In order to demonstrate the process I engaged in when struggling with competing theories I will present some of the roles from my study of the McKenzie school district. Hopefully, these examples will provide a picture of a neophyte qualitative researcher searching for a theory that would best help explain the managing and coping strategies utilized by central office personnel, principals, and teachers.

The Superintendent--Dr. Phil Norris During the year I had few opportunities to observe the superintendent as he went about his work. In part, I believe that this was a reflection of the manner in which he delegated responsibility within the district, choosing to be a public relations person and assigning the work of monitoring the curriculum and instruction aspects of the district to the assistant superintendent. However, there were indicators during the year that suggested that Norris was performing his duties in a manner that gained him favor with the McKenzie School Board. This culminated with a headline in the local McKenzie newspaper: "Norris Rated 'Excellent' by Board."

The superintendent employed his own managing and coping strategies during the course of the school year. In the face of steadily declining test scores over the four years Norris had been at McKenzie, the "posture" presented to the school board was one strategy of coping with a changed emphasis on the district's testing program. At a mid-January meeting of the board, the superintendent assured board members that everything possible was

being done to ensure that the district's children were receiving, and would continue to receive, the best possible curriculum and instruction available. Similarly, the story released to the local McKenzie newspaper following the board meeting represented a picture that was in contrast to the reality of improvement plan development and implementation. (In spite of assurances that improvement plans targetted at halting the tide of declining test scores were being developed and implemented at the school level, there was a lack of evidence for the superintendent's claims to be found among principals and teachers.)

This scenario provides an example of the struggle I faced in searching for a theory that would best fit the events I observed in the McKenzie school district. My graduate studies had introduced me to a number of "theories" that could have possibly explained the actions of the McKenzie school district superintendent. For example, Louis Smith and Pat Keith (1971) discuss this kind of administrative posturing by introducing the concept of "facade," the "formal doctrine as it was presented to the public." According to Smith and Keith, the doctrine includes "an elaborated system of concepts, spelling out the entire structure of means and ends within an organization" (p.21). The superintendent's presentation of the "means and ends" that were to be the focus of the district's improvement plans, represent a "facade" that was different from the reality of the district. Similarly, the story released to the local newspaper following the board meeting represented another facade that was in contrast

to the reality of plan development and implementation. The news story was more a collection of "special instances and fond hopes" (Smith and Keith 1971:21) than an accurate representation of reality.

However, there were competing theories (concepts, hunches) that I struggled to rationalize in my search for an increasing level of abstraction. For example, Anthony Wallace's (1956) notion of the "charismatic leader" in a revitalization movement appeared to provide another way of viewing the role of the superintendent as he managed and coped with a changing emphasis on test scores. Similarly, Robert Merton's concepts of "process" and "function" as applied to latent functions, manifest functions, and unintended consequences of change provided a level of abstraction beyond the "facade" and "charismatic leader" concepts. Further, this "theory" appeared to help explain the managing and coping strategies used by personnel at other levels in the McKenzie school district. Although Merton's theory was not a perfect fit, if indeed such a perfect theory exists to explain any social setting, based on my immersion in the cultural and educational change literature the concepts did appear to be those of "best fit" for my setting.

Principals An example of how I applied Merton's theory can be seen in the following scenario involving the elementary school principals, and teachers in the McKenzie school district. Following the superintendent's increased emphasis on improving test scores in the district, the principals were directed by the

assistant superintendent and director of elementary education to improve the levels of "academic excellence" in their schools (as measured by scores on a standardized test). The principals were also informed that their efforts at dealing with at risk children may have represented misguided priorities as the new focus for the school year would be the development and implementation of improvement plans.

In spite of the evidence presented to the meeting, the general reaction among the principals towards the testing and improvement plan process was cynical. The following comments reflect the barrage of concerns that the central office personnel had to deal with:

The tests dont test what it is that the curriculum being used in our schools teaches.

The results of these tests will drop my staff on their butts. I'm really concerned about the impact all of this will have on morale.

However, the underlying message to the principals from the central office personnel was clear: "It's not the tests or curriculum that are at fault, but the emphasis that has been given to the teaching of the curriculum."

In response to the central office directive to develop and implement improvement plans, many of the principals adopted a "finetuning of instruction" stance. That is, they considered it important that teachers did not overreact to test scores. The message to teachers was simple: "We are going to finetune what we are already doing in the school. We aren't going to make sweeping changes." The principals viewed their jobs in handling

the improvement plans to "finetune" instructional programs, or to write plans that will "keep the folks downtown happy" but remain in the principals desk.

Applying Merton's theory to this scenario provided the following analysis and attempt at an increasing level of abstraction. The manifest function of "finetuning" was to improve instructional programs without overemphasizing the importance of test scores to teachers. The expectation of "finetuning" was that test scores would improve without teachers making major changes to their instructional programs. The latent function of "finetuning" was to validate on-going programs that were proving satisfactory, thus putting principals in the role of "advocates of constraint." Adopting directives from the central office was overshadowed by the adaptation of an innovation and the priority it was awarded in a school. The unintended consequences of "finetuning" was stability of instructional programs.

Teachers Teachers interpreted the comments made by principals as supportive of an attitude of doing little to change programs. The manifest function of the development of improvement plans was to provide teachers with "hard data" on which to base instructional improvement. It was the process the McKenzie school district had been committed to for nearly a decade. The latent function of developing improvement plans was to validate the critical role of the teacher as the person who knows best how to improve the education of children. In spite of central office

efforts to change instructional programs, it was the status of the teacher that was validated. However, the unintended consequences of the accountability placed on teachers to develop and implement improvement plans were not expected by the central office administrators. Teachers were skeptical of the test results and questioned the validity of scores as a measure of the curriculum being taught in the McKenzie schools, and as the basis for instructional improvement. Teachers went through the motions of plan development without becoming advocates of the approach. Principals went along with district directives, and teachers went along with the principals' directives.

Theory, Story Telling, and Increasing Levels of Abstraction

I would argue that theory serves a number of important roles in the development, and reporting of any descriptive narrative. I do not think that a theoretical perspective will tell the story, but I do think that it will influence the choices I make, and the emphasis I give to particular events. As Kaplan and Manners contend, "In practice, anthropological theorizing is a matter of emphasis" (p. 90). But an important element in this cognitive process of theory generation is creative thinking:

the generation and construction of concepts, perspectives, and theories from an initial set of problems, through a long period of sought and unsought percepts and experiences in the field setting, to some final kind of order which appears as a written report. Its open-ended quality frightens some novices and critics and exhilarates others. (Smith 1978:335)

In search of increasing levels of abstraction I believe that it

is important not to lose sight of the creative element that enriches the descriptive narratives at the heart of qualitative research. Smith (1978) proposes that descriptive accounts "hold" in the face of data, and the ideas developed during analysis resulting in a structure that reflects three major dimensions: integrity, complexity, and creativity. According to Smith, integrity means a theme, a thesis, a point of view, with all the pieces of the account fitting together in an interrelated way. Complexity refers to the ability of the major themes and minor nuances to do justice to the system being studied. Finally, in Smith's view, creativity is the conveyance of novel and important ideas to the audience. Arguably, all three of these elements are important to the quality of descriptive accounts.

Further, Smith maintains that in judging research reports there are four areas of concern representing increasing levels of abstraction: data, descriptive narrative, analytical-theoretical-interpretive, and metatheoretical. At the data level a series of questions can be asked concerning the data and how they were collected:

The resulting cluster of dimensions--direct on-site observation, freedom of access, intensity of observation, triangulation and multimethods, sampling, and attention to muted cues and unobtrusive signs--seems to comprise the major conditions assuring valid data. (Smith 1978:341)

Secondly, Smith considers the descriptive narrative--the "telling the story of the characters, settings, incidents, and on occasion the drama of conflict, crisis, and denouement" (1978:350). In his discussion of the descriptive narrative, and

the commitment of qualitative researchers to the narrative as one of the outcomes of their research, Smith discusses the implications of the kind of sociological and psychological theory one generates and uses. While the theories that guide one's work will not tell the researcher's story, they certainly exert an influence on the nature of the narrative. As Smith asserts:

The data problems, the metatheoretical dilemmas, and the theoretical stance all contribute a context to the narrative. The individual ethnographer in doing his work is faced with a series of contingent decisions. He who would judge a particular piece of ethnography faces a task no less complex. (Smith 1978:353)

At the next level of abstraction, the theoretical-analytical-interpretive level, Smith discusses the tendency of researchers to move beyond "telling the story of a group" to the more abstract activity of developing theory, analysis, or interpretation. Like Smith, Professor Wolcott urged his students to answer the question, What is your theory of...? I was confronted with this task at various times during my graduate studies as I grappled with different theoretical questions related to educational and cultural change, and culture theory. Little did I realize at the time the importance of these endeavors to the long-term goal of developing theoretical coherence in my analysis and interpretation of the McKenzie school district. I would argue that the task of challenging qualitative researchers to make explicit their theories about the fields they are studying is the responsibility of the research community. One way that this might be achieved is by incorporating a statement of theoretical perspective/s into the

evaluation criteria used by reviewers of qualitative research.

Many neophyte qualitative researchers, such as myself, have difficulty with the notion of "theory generation" as the goal of qualitative research. Yet, in reading qualitative studies Smith identifies five criteria on which he tends to focus at the theoretical level:

1. Insightful distinctions that tell something new about the phenomena.
2. Clear definitions of new concepts at the theoretical, operational, or concrete example levels.
3. A cumulating glossary of these ideas within a specific project.
4. The interrelations of ideas into patterns or concatenations.
5. Findings that are helpful in solving problems in the same broad domain (p.360).

These five criteria suggest that "the theory should be novel, comprehensive, internally consistent, and functional, a reasonably conservative view of theory" (Smith 1978:360).

Finally, Smith considers metatheoretical issues related to what has been learned from a qualitative study. That is, what rationale exists for the manner in which the researcher has phrased the results of the study. Smith identifies six metatheoretical issues he considers important to educational researchers:

1. The root metaphor within which one works--mechanical, organic, formal, or contextual.

2. The inner or outer perspective one chooses, that is, a stance from the subject's point of view or the outsider's point of view.
3. A theory which is more limited in scope and time to a local context versus one that is more general.
4. A level of abstraction that is more descriptive and concrete or more abstract and interpretive.
5. A model of explanation that is more covering law versus one that is configurational or contextual.
6. A theory that is more action oriented and more ethical versus one that more descriptive and analytical. (Smith 1978:365)

The main point here for qualitative researchers is the notion that the individual's position at one or another of the poles in these metatheoretical dilemmas separates their research from each other, and the larger community of educational researchers.

However, my difficulty with the role of theory in the presentation of a descriptive account is linked to the trouble I have with the word theory. I feel more comfortable with labels such as concept, assumption, and maybe even hunch! But what seems important here is recognition that my assumptions (ideology, world view, theory, idea...) about how best to make sense of a social setting will influence the way I have reported my experiences. There are no wrong or right ways to go about a study, there are just different ways of going about the task. Each way has its own contribution to make. But of importance is the specific nature of the task, for this should dictate the way a study is approached.

Whether I identify myself with a particular theoretical perspective, or a conceptual framework based on educational change studies, is perhaps less important than the exercise of actually doing the explication. It seems to me that it doesn't

matter where I fit myself, to which perspective I link my work, as long as I do it.

When Should Theory Enter a Study?

Whether I like to discuss theory or not, the message for me, someone who has been basically atheoretical in his previous work, is that I have always been influenced by a theory (assumption, concept, hunch, idea...). Although I still can't categorically classify myself as a proponent of one school or another, I can acknowledge that there are certain underlying assumptions, that have provided me with perspective in my work. This perspective, I believe, is evident in my propositions about change, and the way in which I have told the story of the McKenzie school district. I would also argue that the theoretical perspectives that have emerged in my work thus far will continue to be enunciated in my future research efforts. However, these existing theories will be in competition with new theories that become internalized as I read current research, and return to my "old favorites" and read them through different lenses--lenses tainted with experience.

But the question remains, "When should theory enter a study?". I would argue that all researchers have little choice about when theory should enter their study--because theory has been there all along! The theory may never have been stated by the researcher, but it has been latent, waiting to be explicated. What varies is the level of commitment to a theoretical

perspective, the explication of theory, and the degree to which it assists or gets in the way of a study, with the ideal state being a balance between direction and creativity, or "foreshadowed notions" versus what the researcher perceives is actually going on.

Roles of Theory in Qualitative Research

Perhaps a final issue to consider are the possible roles that theory itself can play in qualitative research. In light of my efforts struggling with competing theories, none of which is working perfectly, I would propose the following roles:

1. Identification of theoretical concerns taken into the field helps the researcher combat concerns about selectivity of data, and implicit theoretical biases.
2. Concern for theory helps the researcher acknowledge the competing nature of theories, and encourages an internal struggle for the theory of "best fit" while acknowledging the limitations of any singular perspective.
3. Adopting a theoretical perspective provides the researcher with a framework for the problem to be addressed, and the questions that will be taken into the field.
4. Exposure to competing theoretical perspectives in the academic preparation of qualitative researchers allows for the development of "foreshadowed problems" and an initial analysis of a research problem. The "crystalization" of a researcher's theoretical perspective is likely to occur at a later time

during, and after, the fieldwork.

5. Theory allows the researcher to search for increasing levels of abstraction, to move beyond a purely descriptive account. Further, I would propose that it is the increasing level of abstraction we seek in our qualitative work that allows us to communicate the essence of descriptive work to our colleagues at research meetings. How else can we encapsulate many hundreds of pages of description into a ten minute oration, or five page preface?

6. The manner in which researchers apply a theoretical perspective to their work provides a means for judging qualitative research.

7. The struggle endured by a qualitative researcher searching for a theory of best fit promotes creativity. Hence, one outcome of qualitative research is a creative, interesting account. The search for increasing levels of abstraction leads to enriched descriptive accounts, the heart of qualitative research.

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